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FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

**CULT PRIESTHOOD FOR THE PEOPLES
OF THE CANAANITE AREA AND THE
BIBLICAL HEBREW PEOPLE**

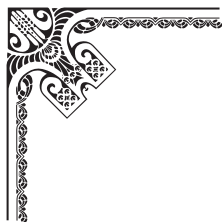
SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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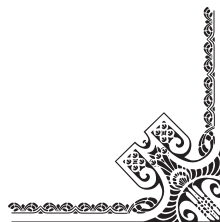
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CULT PRIESTHOOD FOR THE PEOPLES OF THE CANAANITE AREA AND THE BIBLICAL HEBREW PEOPLE

Keywords: *Ancient Near East, religion, faith, deity, priesthood, sacrifice, archaeology, Old Testament, the Canaanite area, fertile crescent, civilization, culture, mythology, idolatry, pantheon, Israel, God, revelation, monotheism, polytheism, interference.*

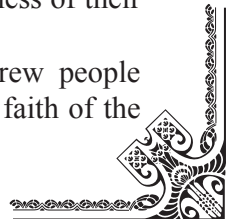
1. Topic rationale

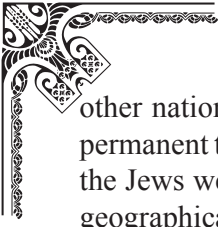
The history of the Ancient Near East, with its remarkable civilization, which is the basis of the social and spiritual development of the whole world, has been generating multiple interpretations and reinterpretations, due to the scale of the archaeological finds and documentary sources which they highlight and continuously update.

A characteristic feature of the Ancient Near East is brought about by the interference of civilizations and cultures of the peoples who, throughout history, have occupied this space. With the Arabian desert as the foothold, the Ancient Oriental world is formed in a semicircle – the fertile crescent - joining the Egyptian and Mesopotamian valleys through the Syro-Palestinian line. The Syro-Palestinian coast therefore used to constitute the link between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, providing their confluence and interference in time and space.

The presence of the Hebrew people in this space and the originality of their religion are all the more remarkable, as they managed to create and perpetuate in time a unique civilization for the ancient Near East area. The religious emergence and evolution of the Hebrew people cannot be separated from the context of Eastern culture and civilization. Monotheism, the realization of their sacred choice and Messianism define it as a people with a unique awareness of their purpose and role in history.

These landmarks of religious identity of the Hebrew people are reinforced by reference to the polytheistic culture and faith of the





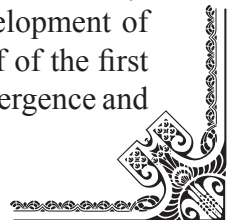
other nations the Jews come into contact with, and who constituted a permanent threat to their existence. Without this reference to the nations the Jews were in permanent contact with, practically sharing the same geographical and cultural space, the springs fuelling this extraordinary religious conscience of the Hebrew people – which would later form the basis of all monotheistic religions – could not be have been understood.

2. Purpose of the work

The purpose of this paper is to perform a comparative analysis on the cult priesthood of the ancient peoples in Canaanite area (Canaanites, Arameans and Jews) based on updated biblical and archaeological documentary sources, with a view to distinguishing the priesthood of the biblical Hebrew people, which is considered to be the prototype of Christian priesthood.

We believe that a comparative research dedicated to the cult priesthood within the religions of the peoples in the Canaanite area is always a novelty, given the archaeological discoveries made, particularly starting with the second half of the last century until the present day. They provide a permanent cycle of interpretation of documentary sources within the scientific community. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to provide a comparative analysis of the cult priesthood of the ancient peoples in the Canaanite area, based on documentary sources, whose understanding was updated by new archaeological discoveries.

Also, another objective of the comparative analysis is to highlight the specificity of the priesthood of the biblical Hebrew people, the manner in which it is defined and asserted in relation to the priesthood and religious practices of the Canaanite peoples. Moreover, the paper also aims to understand how cult practices have an impact on the sacred life of the religious staff (the fertility cult, sacred prostitution, ritual cleansing, sanctity / holiness of life). The role the priestly class had in determining the development of the religious phenomenon, especially in the second half of the first millennium BC (the decline of the sacrificial cult, the emergence and





development of the prayer cult, completion of the biblical canon, development of the messianic idea) is also a secondary objective of the paper.

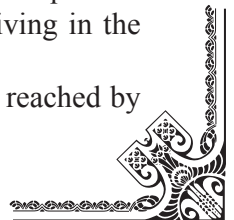
3. Working methodology

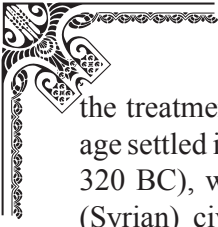
The topic proposed involves, firstly, a thematic approach. This approach is required taking into account the cultural and religious context and specificity of the Ancient Near Eastern space, a space of interference and synthesis which is found beyond the delimitations of the often ephemeral historical existence of the peoples, which contributed to the emergence and development of the Canaanite Aramaic or Hebrew civilizations. Tackling the theme in the context of the relationship between groups of people representing the Canaanite civilization and the Aramaic civilization on the one hand, and the Hebrew civilization on the other hand, starting from general to particular, aims to provide an appropriate framework for a comparative approach.

Moreover, this comparative approach of cult priesthood for the peoples in the Canaanite area will be conducted based on biblical sources, as well as extra-biblical ones. Thus appears the possibility to maintain, throughout the paper, the comparative research character of the forms of religious interaction between the Semitic peoples of the Canaanite area and the Hebrew people, even though the plan of this paper does not allow it to be noticed. The mere reference to the Old Testament biblical sources, whose understanding is conditioned by placing them in the general context of the ancient Near East civilizations, automatically generates the possibility to obtain scientific results supported by the comparative analysis.

All these elements participating and converging to define this relationship between the Canaanite peoples and the Hebrew people underlie the last summary chapter of the thesis, which highlights the interference and boundaries that appear in the manner in which cult priesthood was practised and asserted itself, the role and consequences brought about in the social-religious life of the peoples living in the ancient Canaanite area.

With regard to the chronological limit which can be reached by





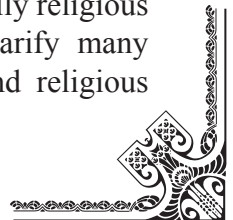
the treatment of the topic proposed, this is the Hellenistic civilization age settled in the ancient Near East after the Macedonian conquest (331-320 BC), which will merge the Canaanite (Phoenician) and Aramaic (Syrian) civilizations. This time corresponds to the end of the Old Testament biblical canon. It is assumed, therefore, that the theme will not exceed the Biblical period of cult priesthood expressions within the Hebrew people, whose existence will cease before long, namely with the disappearance of the Temple and sacrificial worship in AD 70.

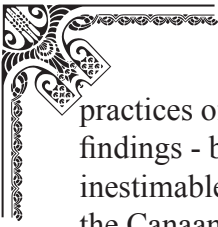
From the methodological point of view, another aspect worth mentioning is the interdisciplinary nature of the paper. Although thematic, the topic falls within the history of religions, but its approach can not be achieved without the support provided by biblical archaeology, the study and exegesis of the Old Testament or the history and culture of ancient civilizations. With this interdisciplinary support, the paper can become a really useful scientific contribution to theological subjects and beyond.

4. Assessment of documentary sources

Until the development of biblical archaeology in the first half of last century, the Old Testament was the main source of information for the history and culture of the ancient Near East area and implicitly for the knowledge of the religion of the West Semitic peoples (Canaanites and Arameans) with whom the Jews were in permanent contact. However, given that the Scripture cannot be read simply as a historical document, critical interpretation obviously won as being absolutely necessary for all the information that the Scripture offers regarding the neighbouring peoples of ancient Israel. In general, these references are very few, since the authors of the books of the Old Testament were very selective about the content of their work.

Archaeology will bring an important contribution, which, although it can not confirm everywhere the fundamentally religious meaning of the Holy Scripture, still manages to clarify many scriptural texts, including the testimonies of faith and religious





practices of the peoples in the Canaanite area. These archaeological findings - both material and literary (written texts) evidence - are of inestimable value to the knowledge of the religion of the peoples in the Canaanite area.

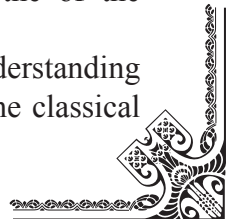
The most important are the texts from Ugarit - Ras Shamra on the northern coast of Syria, discovered in 1929. These texts were dated in the 14th and 13th centuries BC, being written in the ancient Canaanite language, but also in Akkadian, Egyptian, Hittite and Hurrian. The texts discovered have a rich religious content, including information about myths, lists of sacrifices, etc., from the Canaanite lands.

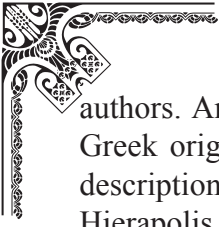
Other extremely precious archaeological documents for the knowledge of the Canaanite religion are the cuneiform letters from Tell-el-Amarna, which record the correspondence of Canaanite princes in their capacity as vassals to the Pharaoh of Egypt. Although they have an eminently political character with a very limited religious content, the letters provide a good insight into the realities of the political, economic and social life in Canaan in the first half of the 14th century BC.

The oldest Canaanite texts seem to be the ones recently discovered by an Italian archaeological mission at Ebla (in northern Syria). They date from the 2nd millennium BC, and are therefore considered to be the oldest Semitic texts. They include numerous mythological information, incantations, hymns dedicated to the gods, collections of proverbs, etc.

Particularly important is the information provided by the archaeological discoveries made in Mari, present day Tell Hariri, in south-east Syria. This settlement, although not mentioned in the Old Testament, was the capital of a great Amorite city-state during the second millennium BC. In Mari no less than 22,000 clay tablets were discovered, providing valuable information on the of the biblical patriarchs.

Another important source of information for understanding the religion of the Canaanite and Aramaic peoples is the classical





authors. Among them, we mention Lucian of Samosata, writer of Greek origin who, in his famous work *De Dea Syria*, gives us a description of the temple and worship of goddess Atargatis of Hierapolis.

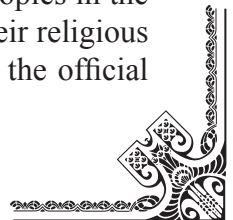
Philo of Byblos is the one who, based on the statements of the Phoenician priest Sanchuniathon, conceives the Phoenician cosmogony. Other useful statements can be found in Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, work containing interesting facts about the religion of the Canaanites. Also, important evidence about the Canaanites and their practices of worship can be found from the Neoplatonic writer Porphyry, which reached us through Eusebius of Caesarea, who “inserted” fragments taken from Porphyry in his work, *Praeparatio Evangelica*.

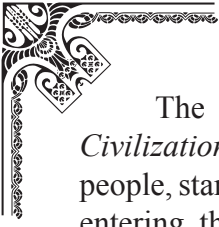
5. Framework of the paper

The paper proposed for analysis is divided into six chapters, preceded by a short introduction and followed by some concluding ideas.

The first chapter is introductory in nature, the following being presented therein: purpose of the paper, rationale for the topic, working method and sources that are the subject of our research.

The second chapter entitled *Canaanite culture and civilization. The peoples of the Canaanite area*, introduces the reader into geographical and historical context of the ancient Near East in the second half of the Bronze Age, during which the area of the so-called “fertile crescent” begins to be well organized in political terms, the small city-states established on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea becoming powerful urban centres with a highly developed economy. The second chapter of the paper also presents, in addition to the geographical, historical, political and economic Canaanite area, the cultural context of the peoples in the area, context which proved to be decisive in shaping their religious life expressed through ritual manifestations specific to the official cult officiated in the community.



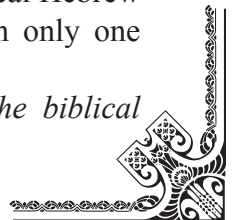


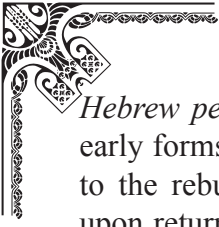
The third chapter of the thesis (*Hebrew Culture and Civilization*), is a summary of the history of the biblical Hebrew people, starting with the Biblical patriarchs period, Egyptian exodus, entering the “Promised Land” (Canaanite area), the Babylonian exile until the conquest of the Near East by Alexander the Great, when the Hellenistic culture and civilization became the rule in the entire area.

All these stages in the history of the Hebrew people were extremely important moments in the formation and development of the Jewish religion, the Jews becoming in time a strong theocratic state, their whole existence being determined by the relationship with God-Yahweh. “The Pact” the Hebrew people make with God and the fulfilment of the Divine prescriptions transmitted through His spiritual leaders strengthened the Hebrew community and their conscience of “the chosen people” with a clearly defined purpose in human history.

The fourth chapter (*Priesthood for the peoples of the Canaanite area*) presents in detail the religion of the civilizations in the Canaanite area the Hebrew people came into contact with: Phoenicians, Arameans, Edomites, Moabites, Nabateans and the Philistines, all information displayed being authenticated by updated archaeological discoveries. The information contained in this chapter presents both the organization of the respective religions (pantheon, temples, priestly class, role of royalty in worship, etc.), as well as a presentation of sacrificial ritual celebrated in the temples of the major deities who dominated all the major gods of the most important city-states of the ancient Near East. The description of the architecture of temples and places of worship, the priestly class organization and its role, as well as the presentation of worship for the peoples in the Canaanite area pursue a clear evidence of their polytheistic ideas in contrast to the religion of the biblical Hebrew people, religious conception characterized by belief in only one God.

The fifth chapter entitled *Cult priesthood for the biblical*

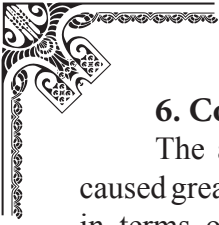




Hebrew people presents the religion of the Hebrew people, from early forms of Deity worship encountered at the biblical patriarchs to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, upon return from the Babylonian exile. The information, based on both the biblical Old Testament sources and on extra-biblical ones, outlines the evolution of the religious life of the Hebrew people from nomadic and semi-nomadic cult events to the heyday of building the Great Temple of Jerusalem by King Solomon, where the priestly class and sacrifices experienced a period of prosperity through well-structured organization. Also, this chapter's role is to present the specific Jewish religion in a geographical area where the neighbouring nations differ radically from their religious views and how the Hebrew people managed to adapt to new historical realities regarding the possibility of practising their religion officially, respectively during the Babylonian exile.

The last chapter of the thesis *Comparative elements between the Canaanite priesthood and the biblical Old Testament priesthood* shows how our research goals have been reached. As evident from the title, the present study is intended as a comparison between the religion of the peoples of the Canaanite area on the one hand, and the religion of the Hebrew people on the other hand, in the historical context of the ancient Near East. The manner in which all the peoples in the Canaanite area has interfered has left traces in the religious conscience of each of these civilizations. Nevertheless, there are a few key elements that determine the specificity of each of these religions, namely: the nature of religious duties and their source of origin, form and symbolism of cult events and their purpose or ideas about Messianism and eschatology. Also, a very important conclusive aspect is the identification of the reasons that determined the continuity or disappearance of some of these religions in the next period, when Hellenism was imposed in the ancient Near East area.





6. Conclusions

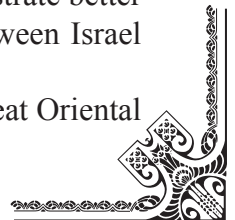
The ancient Near East area, as a cradle of civilization, has caused great interest among researchers of the religious phenomenon, in terms of age, wealth and variety of documentary material it provides. The so-called “fertile crescent” has been emerging since the dawn of history as the most fertile area for human culture and civilization, from this perspective being as well called the “fertile crescent of the old world.”

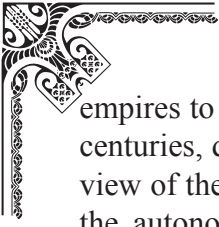
Located between the two great areas of Eastern civilization, Nile Valley Egypt and Mesopotamia of the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, the Semitic peoples of the Arabian Desert found in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, with its potential of encountering and exchange, a common point of attraction around which they will revolve centuries to come. The diversity of landforms has also imposed a fragmentation in the lives of the peoples encountered in the area, as, in time, there was no specific people or group to prevail and impose themselves in the area, each with their phase, their moment of growth and assertion.

Although fragmented and varied, this space does not remain in history as only one an “intermediary” one, but specifically as one of interference and networking. In other words, although it seems to be a cultural amalgam, the Syro-Palestinian area or the Canaanite area is well defined even by the variety of its components which give its specificity in the broader context of the ancient Near East.

Reality can be defined only by context and synthesis, so that you can get to know it as thoroughly as possible. Until the conquest of Alexander the Great and the dominance of the Hellenistic civilization and the culture in the entire region, the Near East and especially the Canaanite area cannot be addressed unless in terms of a common history of culture and civilization of small independent nations. Moreover, the religious beliefs and life can illustrate better than any other factor the nature of the relationship between Israel and the neighbouring peoples.

The historical niche offered by the crisis of the great Oriental





empires to the Semitic peoples in the Canaanite area for over three centuries, during 1200-900 BC, is fully exploited from the point of view of the cultural and spiritual development and assertion. Later, the autonomy typical of great oriental empires will allow these small nations to survive for a long time, the cultural factor being the fundamental support in this regard. When, however, it cannot produce its specific effect due to the penetration and assimilation force of the Hellenistic culture starting with the 4th century BC, these peoples disappear from history, with one exception, the Jews. What differentiates them from the other nations and also ensures their survival in history is the religious factor through which they manage to place themselves beyond all spheres of cultural influence whose conceptual strength and vitality fail to cause identity vulnerability.

Belief in one universal God, as well as their conscience as a “chosen people” in the midst of other peoples, will provide in Jews the ability to survive even outside a political state. From the socio-cultural point of view, the Jews belong to the joint Syro-Palestinian area, their interference with other nations in the region being a permanence of their ancient history, this situation often producing strong internal tensions and crises. Their religious conscience singles them out. But even this distinct religious conscience emerges in time and space in relation to the culture, religiosity and religious practices of their neighbouring peoples. In other words, Israel cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context of its existence, framework according to which it defines its distinctive religious tone. This is entirely true as far as priesthood is concerned, leading factor through which the relationship between ancient Israel and the other peoples of the Canaanite area can be viewed and defined.

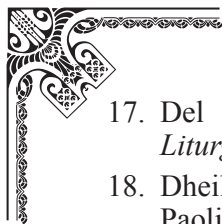
Strictly theologically, the debate and evaluation of this relationship can only contribute to a better understanding of that calling which induces, since the prophet Moses, a constant tension in the religious life of the Hebrew people, to be or rather to become “a holy people, a royal priesthood, a Godly people”.





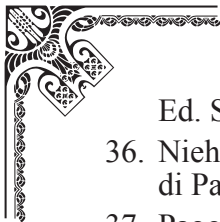
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